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**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD  
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

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Landmark/District:	<b>Capitol Hill Historic District</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Address:	<b>426 11<sup>th</sup> Street, SE</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent
		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Concept
Meeting Date:	<b>December 20, 2012</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration
Case Number:	<b>12-560</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	<b>Amanda Molson</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition
		<input type="checkbox"/> Subdivision

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Owners Karl and Julie Moeller, with plans prepared by Jennifer Fowler, request concept review for a rooftop addition to 426 11<sup>th</sup> Street, SE in the Capitol Hill Historic District.

**Property Description**

Constructed in 1883 by owner W.D. Campbell, 426 11<sup>th</sup> Street, SE is a two-story frame house sited on a berm above sidewalk level and set back generously from the street. To the left (north) is a side court that measures approximately 33' deep, terminating in a two-story brick extension of the house that extends the width of the side court.

The court separates 426 from a group of three frame (now stucco) houses of earlier construction than the subject property. To the right (south), 426 is attached to the neighboring frame (now stucco) house at 428, which is sited very close to the sidewalk along with its mate at 430.

The house opens into Walker Court on the rear, one of Capitol Hill's handful of named alleys. The southern half of Walker Court, where 426 is sited, is occupied by one-story garages. The northern half of the alley, across an east-west artery, is occupied by several inhabited carriage houses.

**Proposal**

The applicants seek to construct a rooftop addition to the house in order to provide a master bedroom suite and deck. The addition would start 15'-2" back from the front wall. The first 7', extending along the side court, would be occupied by an enclosed stair with a sloped roof and by the deck. The remaining portion of the addition (approximately 30' in depth) would rise to 9'-4" above the existing roofline. The plans show that the addition would include a 3' wide side setback on the south side, against 428.

Most of the rear elevation and one side elevation would be finished in brick to continue the material of the existing rear extension to the house. The remainder of the rear elevation, which sits atop an enclosed frame porch, would be finished in hardiplank, as would the other side elevation.

## Evaluation

As a preliminary matter, HPO requested that a mockup of the proposed third floor's front and side walls be constructed at the site in order to evaluate its potential visibility and impact. A mockup, when measured and built accurately and when easily visible, provides a reliable representation of rooflines, can be viewed by interested parties and community organizations, and can be photographed for presentation to the HPRB. The burden of proof is on the applicant to clearly and accurately demonstrate visibility. In this case, the mockup was constructed of thin PVC poles and string (later yellow construction tape), making it difficult to depend on the mockup for accuracy. If the project returns to the Board for review at a later time, the HPO recommends that the Board withhold consideration until a reliable mockup is constructed of lumber to allow for accurate assessment and evaluation.

As currently proposed, the project raises several preservation concerns including visibility from the street, compatibility with the building type, and potential impact on a historic alley.

### *Visibility (over the main roof)*

The Board's guidance on rooftop additions makes clear that roof additions are generally discouraged but that they may *sometimes* be achieved when they are "not visible from street views, do not result in the removal or alteration of important character-defining features of the building or streetscape, and are compatible with their context." Additionally, the handout states that "Under most circumstances, roof additions that are visible from a public street are not appropriate, as they would alter an historic building's height, mass, design composition, cornice line, roof, and its relationship to surrounding buildings and streetscape – all of which are important character-defining features that are protected for historic property."

As a basic principle, the Board has consistently required a substantial setback for rooftop additions, such that they are not visible over the main roof when viewed head-on or at oblique angles. In this case, the mockup viewed and photographed by HPO staff on 12/3 demonstrated that the roofline would be visible when viewed head-on, standing on the sidewalk directly across the street. The mockup was subsequently adjusted by the applicants to increase the setback of the front (west-facing) wall by about 14" and to reduce the height of the addition in some sections. When observed and photographed by HPO on 12/11, the new mockup utilized a piece of yellow construction tape. There did appear to be some improvement, but it was difficult to accurately gauge visibility and firmly state that visibility over the main roof had successfully been mitigated.

When a mockup is being adjusted in height or set back by several inches in order to disappear from view, this visibility is, of course, a best-case scenario. It assumes the most compact floor and roof assemblies possible, no rooftop mechanical units, a complete lack of side parapets, and construction that perfectly complies with the drawings with no errors or unforeseen circumstances. Experience shows that a view from across the street that just touches, or just misses, a proposed rooftop addition is an almost-certain indication that the addition would be at least somewhat visible. When cutting it this close, the end result when real construction is completed typically results in some degree of visibility.

### *Visibility (through the side court)*

Most rooftop addition proposals affect attached buildings, in which the abutting structures on each side can help to screen views of an addition. In cases where the building is detached on one or both sides, views of the addition via secondary elevations of the house should be carefully considered. At this property, there is no setback from the front so generous that all visibility would be eliminated via the side court. The court provides a view of the addition at the back of this areaway, with the west-facing wall rising above the two-story house. Additionally, any vertical extension placed along the side (north-facing wall) will be visible from certain vantage points.

The breadth and impact of these views is mitigated somewhat by the generous depth and relatively narrow width of the side court, by the building's setback from the street, and by its siting above-grade. However, portions of the side and front walls reach over 9' in height, making them visible down the side court and diminishing the sense that the court is currently open to the sky. For this type of semi-detached house, the Board must consider whether *any* visibility is appropriate and, if so, what amount successfully reads as recessive, subordinate, and deferential to the main block.

The Board has approved some rooftop additions that have been visible via side walls. For example, the Board approved the addition of a third floor to 906 G Street, SE (HPA #08-077), which is detached on the west-facing side elevation. An existing parapet wall screened the lower half of the addition so that only about 5' was visible above the roofline. The as-built result is deferential to the massing of the main house, and the combination of the setback and the perceived low height renders the rooftop addition barely noticeable to passersby. Perhaps a suitably recessive rooftop addition can be achieved at 426 11<sup>th</sup>, but it will be challenging if the side wall of the addition extends along the open court, especially at the maximum height.

### *Building Type*

Visibility is typically the first test that rooftop additions face, as many fail at meeting even this most basic principle. However, the preservation law does not limit the Board's purview to what is visible from the street, nor does it dismiss the importance of the rear, top, or body of a building. All aspects of historic buildings may be important, including their physical fabric and inherent massing and building form. In addition to visibility, the Board's consideration of rooftop additions has commonly involved evaluation of the specific building affected in terms of its character-defining features and how these may be impacted by the addition.

Adding vertically to frame buildings in historic districts is inherently more problematic than adding to masonry buildings. Washington's frame buildings are nearly all of quite early vintage, as they generally preceded the city's building code restrictions related to fire prevention or were built in the first few years afterwards. As a result, many of these buildings were constructed just after the Civil War or during the 1870s and early 1880s, prior to the city's building "boom" of masonry buildings during the 1890s and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some frame houses have already been lost to time, and others have been compromised by insect or water damage. Those that remain, particularly those as beautifully articulated as 426 11<sup>th</sup> Street, SE, are all the more precious and should be treated accordingly.

While there are a few notable exceptions, the height of Washington's frame houses is overwhelmingly two stories. As a result, creating a three-story frame building, whether visible from the street or not, is inherently at odds with the predominant massing of this building type. The change in massing can be made less awkward and the extent of demolition minimized by limiting the footprint of a rooftop addition to the rear ell of the house and by designing the roof form to read as either a natural extension of the building or as an architectural expression of its own.

Limiting the roof addition to the rear ell wing is consistent with Board actions on similar frame houses. At the two-story frame house at 22 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, NE, the Board approved an addition that was placed almost completely on the rear ell. At 521 and 523 11<sup>th</sup> Street, SE (HPA #04-438), a large three-story rear addition to a pair of two-story frame houses was set back 42' from the front façade. At 19 4<sup>th</sup> Street, NE (HPA #08-321), a rear and partial roof addition to a frame house was designed as a contemporary expression wholly of its own time and pulled well off the apex of the building's gable roof in order to highlight the original roof form.

As proposed, a substantial proportion of this addition (approximately 18') would be sited on the main block of the house. The *visual* impact is that the gently sloping roof would become a vertical wall, visible via the side court, after the initial 15' setback. The *physical* impact is that the roof would presumably be restructured nearly in its entirety in order to accommodate the new floor. A more substantial setback for the additional floor, limited to the rear brick wing, would alleviate some of these concerns by allowing the original roof slope to be evident, by retaining the bulk of the original roof structure, and by being consistent with other projects approved by the Board.

#### *Alley Impact*

426 11<sup>th</sup> Street backs up to one of Capitol Hill's historic, named alleys. Though the Board has not yet adopted design guidelines specific to alleys or firmly established the hierarchical significance of inhabited alleys, it is reasonable to look more closely at the design and massing of rooftop and rear additions that are visible to alley residents, as compared to less important vantage points from purely service-based alleys that provide parking and trash collection. That said, the Board has regularly provided some flexibility on the treatment of rear elevations, and they have rarely been held to the same standards as front or highly-articulated side elevations.

As many alleys are surrounded by three-story buildings, this height taken alone does not negate the compatibility of a project. Instead, the Board should focus on requiring strong design and high-quality materials, a sympathetic roof form and/or a rear setback, and massing that complements the overall character of the subject property, the alleyscape, and the surrounding buildings.

As designed, the rear elevation of the third floor rises straight up from the back wall without relief. Though the existing roof appears to slope from side-to-side, the new roofline would be nearly flat. Softening this appearance would help the addition to more convincingly read as a more graceful extension of the house rather than a new "box" on the roof. This might be achieved with more generous slope to the roof or by exploring a new roof form and change in materials in order to provide a clear break in massing between the lower and upper floors.

For example, the Board required that the roof of a new, two-story rear addition to 308 9<sup>th</sup> Street, SE (HPA #09-283) be generously sloped to the side to better respond to the roof slope of the adjoining frame house. A mansard roof form was used on the rear elevation of the aforementioned rooftop addition at 22 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, NE, and it was also used on a rooftop addition to 645 A Street, SE (HPA #09-384), which backs up to inhabited Brown's Court. Rear setbacks have also been used on rooftop additions, though the impact may well be detrimental to this project if employed in concert with a more generous (and arguably more important) front setback. However, if preferred by the applicants, it would certainly improve the current proposal and could perhaps be an opportunity to convert the front roof deck into a rear balcony instead.

### **Recommendation**

*If the general idea of a rooftop addition is deemed appropriate in this instance, the HPO recommends that the Board find the current proposal incompatible and direct the applicants to develop an alternative proposal which achieves the following:*

- *the additional floor should be limited to above the rear brick portion of the house and off the building's frame main block in order to reduce its visibility and eliminate demolition to the frame portion of the building;*
- *the rear elevation should be restudied in terms of roof slope, roof form, and/or materials to improve the compatibility of its design and the impact on the building's mass and shape;*
- *after preparing a mockup as outlined above, the project should be resubmitted for Board review.*